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INTRODUCTION: A TEACHING AND LEARNING CENTER CREATES NEW OPPORTUNITIES FOR FACULTY...AND STUDENTS

From the Vice President for Academic Affairs

Mary Ellen Finch, Vice President for Academic Affairs, Maryville University

The essays that follow are, in large part, the result of a fortuitous combination of people being at the right place at the right time. And of having the right people as well. Furthermore, none of these essays and stories could have unfolded without the development of a Center for Teaching and Learning on the Maryville University campus in the Fall of 2004, or without the creation of a Scholarship of Teaching and Learning Seminar Program within the Center that involved a significant number of university faculty over the past six years.

This introduction and the essays that follow are thus very personally as well as institutionally significant. They tell multiple stories of how we have, through our work within the Center and, in particular, through the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning, come to develop a sharp focus on student learning and, beyond that, student participation in designing and analyzing learning opportunities.

The Beginning

Maryville University, located in the western suburbs of St. Louis, Missouri, is an independent, regional university with a total enrollment of approximately 4,000 students, offering programs through the doctoral level. The original impetus for the Center for Teaching and Learning (CTL) at Maryville surfaced in the 90's when, as Dean of the School of Education, I learned of the initiative by the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching to offer grants to higher education institutions for the development of teaching/learning centers. Although the university did not pursue this opportunity at that time, the idea stayed with me.

The opportunity for developing a center for teaching re-surfaced when, some years after my retirement as Dean of the School of Education, I returned to Maryville to serve in several interim administrative positions. As I was about to retire once again, the VPAA offered me a deal I could not refuse. It was the opportunity to become Associate Vice President and to initiate and direct a Center for Teaching and Learning.

The Center, with the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning Seminar as a major activity, began officially in the late spring of 2004 when I issued an invitation to all full-time faculty, asking who would be interested in studying their teaching in a one-year seminar. Concurrently, and of major import, was my long-standing relationship with Marilyn Cohn, with whom I had worked earlier at Washington University in St. Louis. Marilyn, who ultimately became Director of Teacher Education, had built the program at Washington University around inquiry into one's teaching through action research, and had just retired from Washington University in 2003. Marilyn had also been selected to participate in the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching work on the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (SoTL) as a Teaching Fellow. Her expertise and interest in action research and SoTL were the perfect fit for the Maryville CTL

Faculty Seminar. Fortunately, Marilyn was intrigued by the invitation to co-teach such a seminar and signed on for the job.

The Implementation and Early Stages

My early invitation to faculty who might be interested in studying their teaching and student learning drew what one might call “a full house.” Consultation with Marilyn made it clear that a seminar of 10 faculty would be ideal; thus, drawing from faculty members who indicated interest I selected 10 faculty members from a variety of academic disciplines to participate.

While the seminar was designed to encompass one year, it became clear to the faculty involved that a single year would be insufficient. Interestingly, the first faculty member to suggest a two-year process was initially skeptical but ultimately became as much of a true-believer as any participant. Over the years, the seminar has grown and changed as Marilyn and her participants grappled with a major focus on qualitative research, which was foreign to many faculty members. However, the heart of the seminar continues to be a group of ten faculty members drawn from diverse disciplines, volunteering to spend two years together twice a month studying their teaching and, ultimately, the learning of their students. To date (2012) over 60% of the full-time faculty members at Maryville have participated in the seminar and utilized their research to improve their practice and further their scholarly endeavors. Published papers, conference presentations, chapters in books and success in the promotion and tenure process demonstrate the significance of the seminar on the Maryville campus.

The Conference and Its Ramifications

Several years into the seminar, upon hearing of several conferences nationally that focused upon the scholarship of teaching and learning, Marilyn and I felt it important to take our faculty to present their SoTL projects and connect with colleagues doing similar work across the country. After several years of attending these conferences, faculty members concluded that the classroom research they were doing was, in many ways, closer to a SoTL model than what they had been hearing elsewhere. Confident that we could do a far better job of holding a conference ourselves, we decided to create the Maryville University Scholarship of Teaching and Learning Conference, now moving into its fourth year. Of course, the Maryville conference gave the Maryville faculty a venue for presenting their work; however, as important, the conferences gave us the opportunity to bring outstanding SoTL scholars to our campus and learn from them. Starting with approximately 75 participants in the first year of the conferences (2008), the conference has grown to over 175 participants, drawing faculty from all over the United States and into Canada.

Moving from Teaching to Teaching and Learning to Active Student Engagement

Over the last several years of hosting and attending conferences and immersing ourselves in the possibilities of SoTL, the Center’s initial focus on teaching has moved logically to a focus on learning. In 2009, Carmen Werder (Werder/Otis, 2010) and a panel of her students from Western Washington University were conference keynote speakers and introduced us to the idea of engaging the voices of students in SoTL work. What seems obvious to us now simply wasn’t on

the radar in the early days. And even more recently, as the result of our highly successful 2011 SoTL Conference and the presentations by Alison Cook-Sather, we have moved further along the path to engaging students themselves in the process, as can be seen from several of the essays in this journal.

In the last three essays, one can see that the study of one's teaching and direct involvement of students has begun to impact our First Year University Seminar. Indeed, we foresee even more exciting and productive dialogue, which will benefit our entire campus. As the result of Cook-Sather's work and the excitement that it generated (both with faculty and with Maryville students who were attending our conference), a pilot project has begun this spring (2012) involving four faculty members and four students, all volunteers, who will be working together to "study and engage" within the faculty members' classrooms.

With the move to engaging students in the process of researching teaching and learning, it is hard for me now to even imagine that the idea that I had back in 2004 to initiate a center for the professional development of faculty would have such far-reaching consequences. The papers that follow demonstrate the significance and power of that single idea.